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35

An Exercise in  
The Transcription and Analysis of Laughter

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With an appended glossary of transcript symbols

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of the "bubbling laughter" to the talk which is occurring "through" it (see arrow).

(8) [GTS:I:2:33:R2, 1977]

Ken: An'e came home'n decided'e wz gonna play with iz o:rchids.  
from then on i:n.  
Roger: With iz what?  
Louise: mh hih hi<sup>h</sup> hu<sup>h</sup>  
Ken: With iz orchids.=  
Ken: =Ee z got an orchid-  
Roger: Oh:.. hehh [h a h 'he:h 'heh  
Louise: [→ ya:h I [thought the same [heh huh 'hh] PLĀYN(h)W(h)IZ O(h)RN  
Roger: [→ .uh:: [hunhh'hh'hh  
Ken: [Cz eez gotta great big [gla:ss house  
Roger: [I c'n s(h)ee]=  
Ken: (= ( )  
Roger: = [im pl(h)ay with iz o(h)r(h)g\*(h)n 'uh

Now, the focal utterance, as rendered in Fragment (7), "((through bubbling laughter)) Playing with his organ yeah I thought the same thing!" is compatible with a notion Erving Goffman calls 'flooding out' (1961). That is, in this case, while someone is attempting to talk, laughter cannot be contained, and invades the talk. This is a notion shared by participants to conversation. So, for example, in the following fragment, difficulty in hearing the punchline of a dirty joke is accounted for in terms of uncontrollable laughter (see arrow).

(9) [Fr:GS:20:Simplified]

Kate: The American doctor says th(hh)et's no(h)thing, we've  
transpl(h)ant(h)ed uhd(h)a di(h)ck fr'm C(h)alifornia  
tuh Wa(h)shing<sup>ton</sup> Dee:: Cee-ee,  
Sara: Uh:tha:t star-  
Sara: I didn't HEAR yuh Ka::y,  
. .  
Mary: [→ It's d(h)ifficult wh'n she gets t'the punchli:ne sh'can't  
[→ help lau:gh  
. .  
Kate: I:t's we've urry tr- we've transs- tra(h)nsplanted dieg  
fr'm Keh- 'hhhhh fro<sup>m</sup>: Ca:luh-  
Sara: [A wha:::t?  
Kate: [A di:ck.  
Kate: [A di:ck.  
Sara: [UHHH!  
Kate: [from California t'Washinun D(h)ee Cee he screwed the whole  
hng(h)untryhee-hee-hee

And many instances of conversation are compatible with such a notion. For example, the final utterance of Fragment (9) might be seen as a prototypical instance; the final word distorted and punctuated by laughter, the final sound 'giving way' to a burst of laughter: "hng(h)untryhee-hee-hee". Following are a few more instances of this 'giving way' to laughter.

(10) [Fr:USI:23:R]

Mike: ih wz in my hand I wz ready tuh throw it up against the wahaw haw haw haw 'hnh

(11) [G:AD(b):7:R]

Bart: Wuhdjih say ab(h)out mih-hih-hee-hee

(12) [SBL:2:2:3:R:56]

Chloe: they ↓probaly throw us ↓outta the church↓ I didn'tthink of th\*aa aah aah

But in the focal utterance as rendered in Fragment (8), "PLAYN (h)W(h)IZ O(h)RN ya:h I thought the same", we find a very different configuration, and in that configuration the possibility of an altogether different approach to laughter. Specifically, we might wonder if, on this occasion, the laughter in the course of talk is not 'flooding out', but is being quite specifically placed.

To get a sense of the controllability/placeability of laughter, I show the following fragment.

(13) [Fr:USI:95:R:7:Standard Orthography:Simplified]

Joe: °It's like my° brother one time wants a mi- wants a do:g he wants to bring home a dog but he wants to get a mea:n ↓one that↓ bites:.

(.)

Carol: I almost brought [a dog h o m e ,] But he wanted the dog to bite his wife.

Joe: (0.5)

( ): °ehhhh°

Joe: → [So he come [s ho:me one] night] the son of a bitch [bit hi:m.]

Carol: \*→ [heh heh heh] heh he h heh heh [bit hi:m,]

In strong contrast to the 'flooding out' phenomenon, here we have laughter produced while an utterance in progress is being closely monitored; the laughter stopping at a projectable syllable before the punchline (via the idiom 'son of a bitch'), in preparation for a simultaneous production of that punchline.

Returning to our focal utterance we can notice that while the early transcript proposes that the entire utterance is produced "through bubbling laughter", the later transcript shows that the laughter is present in and only in a discrete segment of that utterance; in the saying of an obscenity. The rest of the utterance is free of laughter. And we can notice that this is not a unique occurrence. For example, in the following fragment, a teenager is being interviewed about his childhood rhymes and games.

(14) [Labov:Quadro:A1061]

Johanna: ( say) catch a nigger by the toe?  
 Mike: → Ye::ah. At's 'd they'd say catch a n(hh)i(hh)gg(h)er by the toe. 'hh! If he hollers let im go.

Again, it is in, and only in, the tender component of this utterance, that we find a burst of laughter.

Once we have the specific 'placement' of laughter as a possible phenomenon, we can begin to examine it as a methodic device. Earlier I suggested that laughter in the course of talk can be used to account for difficulty in 'hearing' what is being 'said'. We might now notice that what is actually being said, as rendered in Fragment (8), is something like "Playn wiz orn," not the perfectly articulated "Playing with his organ" as shown in Fragment (7).

Now, there are two distinctive elements present in the utterance: laughter and slurred pronunciation. While the two elements regularly do

occur in combination, they are not inseparable.

As it happens, slurring is a classically-used device in the production of obscenity. So, for example, we find this description in Robert Graves' "I Claudius":

The witness, who was the best drill-instructor in the Guards, bawled out Montanus's alleged obscenities at the top of his voice, not slurring over the most obscene words or phrases, and refusing to let himself be cried down by the shocked protests of the senators.

(emphasis added)

And Graves very neatly implies the canonical character of such a procedure as 'slurring over obscenity' by simply noticing its absence.

'Slurring an obscenity' can, then, exhibit a certain loyalty to the proprieties; a certain reluctance to say the words one is saying, and thus, in fact, not quite saying the words.

But there might be occasions, such as that which obtains in our focal fragment (a group therapy session for teenage 'delinquents') when the proprieties are reversed; where - as this girl herself proposes - one might want to impress the others by showing that one is "rough, tough, and destructive".

While one might, by training and inclination, indeed be a bit reluctant to come right out and say something, one might not want to be seen as reluctant. If that is the case with this girl (and I will develop a case for her 'reluctance' shortly), then she has found a solution.

Her solution is to combine slurring and laughter. In combination, the presence of laughter can warrant and account for the presence of slurring - not at all as a matter of reluctance, but as a consequence of the delight one is taking in the saying; i.e., the slurring stands as a constituent feature of 'flooding out'; of uncontrollable laughter taking

over and - incidentally - distorting the speech; incidentally making it not-quite-said and difficult to 'hear'.

Further: That the utterance has been rendered difficult to 'hear' can set a task for its recipients, which can result in their becoming accomplices of the speaker. That is, "Playn wiz orn" is an object which may specifically require, rely upon, and instruct its recipients to use, their own 'guilty knowledge', in order to analyze out of the distorted utterance what is being 'said'. They must independently have it 'in mind' in order to 'hear it'.\* In showing that they 'heard' it, as one of them does (see the last few lines of Fragment 8, Roger's "I c'n s(h)ee im pl(h)ay with iz o(h)r(h)g'(h)n"), they are necessarily showing that it was as much in their minds as it was in hers.

In effect, then, the early transcript, by showing the utterance in full standard orthography, is doing the recipient's work. And by so doing it obscures the fact that such a task has been set, as well as the methodic way in which the task has been set; i.e., the placement of the laughter in combination with slurring.

I will take up, now, the issue of the speaker's possible reluctance to say what she is saying; her 'loyalty to the proprieties'. I will deal with this issue by means of a detailed examination of the segment in which the focal utterance occurs.

For one, we can notice that this speaker's re-wording of the target utterance occurs at some distance from it. That is, there is a delay. And we can begin to cut into features of that 'delay'.

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\* For a consideration of a rather similar phenomenon, see Jefferson, G., "What's in a 'Nyem'?", Sociology, Volume 12 Number 1 January 1978.



We can notice in other materials that several people can and do respond simultaneously to some prior utterance, while in this case, only one of the coparticipants initially responds, and it is not our focal speaker, Louise, but one of the other members of the group, Roger.

(8) [Detail]

Ken:           An'e came home'n decided'e wz gonna play with iz o:rchids.  
                  from then on i:n.  
Roger:         With iz what?

That is, at the end of the 'target' utterance, Louise says nothing at all.

Further: Roger's utterance provides a next opportunity for Louise to announce her 'hearing' of the target utterance; i.e., now as an 'answer' to "With iz what?" Such a series would constitute a joking analogy of the occurrence in Fragment (9), in which a recipient asks "A wha:::t?" and someone other than the prior speaker provides an answer (in this case, simultaneously with the prior speaker):

(9) [Detail]

Kate:           we:'ve trans- tra(h)nsplanted dieg fr'm Keh- 'hhhhh  
                  fro\_m: Ca:luh-  
Sara:         →         A wha:::t?  
Kate:         →         A di:ck.  
Mary:         →         A di:ck.

Again, then, Louise passes an opportunity to announce her 'hearing'. She does, however, do something at this point. She laughs.

(8) [Detail]

Ken:           An'e came home'n decided'e wz gonna play with iz o:rchids.  
                  from then on i:n.  
Roger:         With iz what?  
Louise:        mh hih hih

Now, unquestionably her laughter can indicate her understanding of the sequence so far; roughly, that Ken has produced a double entendre, and Roger, with his 'query', is pointing to just that feature of the prior

utterance. Similarly, in Fragment (13) Carol's laughter indicates her understanding of what is implicated in Joe's talk so far. But in contrast to Fragment (13), in which the indicative laughter is followed by an explicit display of understanding (i.e., the simultaneously-produced 'punchline', "bit him"), in this case, Louise does no more than laugh. That is, she may have indicated her position, but she has not made it explicit.

And in this regard we can notice a detail of her laughter which is not available in the early transcript. She does not simply produce a laugh of some self-contained duration. Rather, the moment Ken starts his response to Roger's question, Louise's laughter stops.

(8) [Detail]

Ken:           An'e came home'n decided'e wz gonna play with iz o:rchids.  
                  from then on i:n.  
Roger:         With iz what?  
Louise:     → mh hih hih huh  
Ken:         →                      [With iz orchids.

So far, then: At completion of the 'target' utterance, Louise has remained silent. At completion of a 'repeat-request', an object which may be pointing to the double entendre, or may simply be produced by reference to a failure to 'hear', she produces something indicative of her understanding, but not explicit; i.e., laughter. And the moment the speaker of the 'target' utterance starts to speak, his utterance possibly resolving the unfolding ambiguity, with either a reference to the double entendre or a straight repeat, her laughter cuts off.

In these ways her activities may be seen to be enormously cautious and sensitive to the possibility that no one else is going to bring the obscene possibility of "play with his orchids" to the conversational surface. Perhaps no one else noticed it.



a bit earlier. And at that moment, she acts to 'join in' laughing, where, then, out of their 'laughing together', emerges her explicit announcement of the obscene possibility, specifically described as "I thought the same".\*

## (8) [Detail]

Roger: With iz what?  
 Louise: mh hih hih huh  
 Ken: With iz orchids.=  
 Ken: =Ee [z got an orch id-  
 Roger: Oh:. [hehh [h a h 'he:h] 'heh  
 Louise: [heh huh 'hh] PLAYN(h)W(h)IZ O(h)RN  
 ya:h I thought the same

I will turn now to the fact that not only is the laughter/slurring present in one segment of the utterance, but that it is only in that segment.

In contrast to the instances compatible with the notion of 'flooding out'; i.e., Fragments (9)-(12) in which the talk is, in effect, carried off by laughter, here we find, after a burst of laughter, talk with no laughter in it, and, as well, no slurring.

A question is, why stop the laughter/slurring at this point? And the prior analysis suggests an answer. If the laughter/slurring is produced to aid in the obscuring of what is being 'said', then it may be terminated to aid in the accessibility of what is said thereafter.

Such a possibility directs our attention to the work which may be going on in the 'clear' segment of talk. That segment of talk turns out to be a particularly elaborate and explicit version of the second part of

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\* For a consideration of the sequential relationship of laughter to 'improper' talk, see Jefferson, G., Sacks, H., and Schegloff, E.A., "On laughter in pursuit of intimacy", forthcoming December 1983 as a 'pre-publication' issued by the Centro Internazionale Di Semiotica E Linguistica, Urbino.

a standard format, of which the laughter-slurred segment is thereby shown to constitute the first part.

The 'base' format is: [Repeat + Acknowledgement Token].

(15) [GTS:II:2:73]

Al: → See we gotta have the broad here cause<sub>she-</sub> she unites us.  
 Ken: → she- she unites us, yeah.

(16) [Fr:HB:II:4:Standard Orthography]

Jan: as soon as he said the do:gs were okay somehow I could  
 → handle the whole thing. (You know?)  
 Penny: → The whole thing yeah.

At the least, such a format acknowledges the prior speaker's authorship of the utterance being repeated, and marks accord with the prior utterance.

The format becomes interesting when it is used for next utterances which are not literal repeats; where, were the acknowledgement token not present, such issues as 'authorship' and 'accord' might become problematic. So, for example, in the following fragment, a repair is proposed to be, for all practical purposes, no more than a repeat.

(17) [Friedell:37:Standard Orthography]

Sandy: WHICH ONE'S the one that he marries the girl and she die:s  
 in the car wreck.  
 Hank: °ehho° That's:::: On Her  
 (1.0)  
 Hank: → On Her Majesty's::: Service or::  
 Sandy: → On Her Majesty's Secret Service °that's right°  
 Hank: °Secret S e r v]ice yeah.°

In this case, simultaneous with the acknowledgement token "that's right", which attributes (correct) authorship to and marks accord with the prior speaker, that speaker repeats the repair-relevant segment and produces the acknowledgement token "yeah" which attributes authorship of the 'correction' to his coparticipant and accepts the correction.

In the following fragments, the [Repeat + Acknowledgement] format is invoked when a recipient is actually, literally 'saying' something which has not been said by a prior speaker. The acknowledgement token here proposes that a recipient's utterance constitutes in effect, something which a prior speaker did not actually say, but had so strongly projected that the recipient is to be seen as merely doing the actual saying of it, but not as its 'author'.

(18) [Valdez:5:Standard Orthography]

Claire:       It's bad enough when he, when he uhm, (0.3) tells you how  
           →    much to make but when he tells you what to cook.  
 Martha: \*→   Then it's really bad yeah.

(19) [GTS:III:62]

Louise:       My father's six foot two feet, he's large, and  
           →    {he's a very s-  
 Ken:            {ehheh  
                           (1.0)  
 Ken:       \*→   St(hh)able person yea(hh)h

These latter two fragments begin to verge on our focal fragment. But "PLAYN(h)W(h)IZ O(h)RN ya:h I thought the same" is more complex than the prior two. And what it is to be treated as doing is explicitly asserted in the talk following the acknowledgement token. That is, here we do not merely get "PLAYN(h)W(h)IZ O(h)RN ya:h", but that format plus the explicit, "I thought the same".

With this utterance, a speaker is not to be seen as authoring an utterance, but as reporting a thought she had; a thought she now sees that a coparticipant also had; i.e., a shared thought; a thought that would have remained but-a-thought had that coparticipant not produced activities which could be taken to indicate that he was thinking the very thing she is saying she thought, too. It is by virtue of the fact that he can be understood to have demonstrated that he had the thought, that she is now

in a position to report that she, too, had it.

In sum, then: As the entire utterance proceeds, we find, in a literally initial saying of this obscenity, first of all, work which, by obscuring its saying, implicates others via the work it will take for them to understand it. The obscured saying of the obscenity is then followed by an acknowledgement token, which formats this actual initial saying as a repeat. And that is followed by an explicit assertion that what was 'said' constitutes a report of a shared thought. It is these two latter activities, the acknowledgement token and the explicit assertion of a shared thought, which are produced 'in the clear'; i.e., in such a way as to provide optimum access to the utterance by its recipients.

What is being proposed with this utterance in its entirety, is complex and interactionally delicate. Although the speaker is the first of the group to explicate the 'thought' (explicate it more or less, that is, with "playn wiz orn", which relies upon and refers coparticipants to their own resources in order to 'hear' it), she is proposing herself to be an Nth contributor to its gradually-emerging explication. It may, then, be no happenstance occurrence that the explicit obscenity is slurred, and accountably slurred with the presence of laughter, and that the complex and delicate proposal about the authorship of the obscenity is produced with utter felicity, free of the laughter which can make an utterance difficult to 'hear'.

Thus, both the presence and non-presence of laughter in this utterance appear to be accomplice to the doing of some particular activities. The laughter is initiated, sustained, and terminated with particular aptness, given the activities underway.

Laughter, then, may not always be a matter of 'flooding out', to

be accounted for as something that 'happens to' a speaker such that he "can't help laugh", but can be manageable and managed as an interactional resource; as a methodic activity which warrants and rewards more than a reference to its occurrence, but close attention to just how and just where it occurs.

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